

“Compassionate Eyes”

August 23, 2020

Mark 10: 46-52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.”

So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.”

Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Some of you know, I am a dog lover and have a sweet Pyrenes. Last week, I saw a dreadful, heart-breaking advertisement from an organization that rescues pets. They warn us that the animals will be euthanized if you do not give a donation. Immediately. You may have seen it.

The distraught animals are brought into your living space. And insist you look into their haunted eyes. Some have lost limbs or eyes or hair or starving. The commentator in a solemn voice even tells you their stories. Baby kittens found in paper bags. Abused animals who have been left in cages or basements for weeks. I truly cannot stand to watch it.

I leave the room. Put my hands over my eyes and ears. Sing. Turn it off completely. I can hardly stand it. I do know mistreatment of animals is true – but it is too much. Maybe because of less human contact images on social media seem to insist we watch.

We have seen up close and personal some pretty ugly sights.

Brown and black people pushed on the ground and strangled to death; the youth artistic black youth shot as he was coming home from buying some skittles.

Exhausted medical staff.

Fires burning out of control, hurricane damaged homes.

Domestic abuse on the rise.

Yelling and physical fights between customers to wear a mask or not.

Bodies piled in one place because the morgues are overflowing with death.

Eye to eye, every day, we can see on social media or even right in our own neighborhood –

long lines for Food Pantries,

unemployment checks, and

scattered rubble and death in Beirut.

Whether we want to or not – it is there. Somedays, I turn it off and watch “When Harry Met Sally” or a Hallmark show. Or close my eyes and try to go to sleep. Hoping not to have any dreams.

Since Covid-19 our eyes have been open to the pain and broken parts of our country, the world and perhaps ourselves too. We may not have seen or ignored before.

The thing is -we do have a choice. What we see. What we have no desire to see. And want we wish to see.

A chapter in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, titled “Seeing”, Annie Dillard writes about the first people in the world to have successful cataract surgery. All blind from birth, they suddenly received their sight. Their stories are disturbing. When they see for the first time, they describe a world - sort of like - a newborn baby or an alien might – when they see for the first time.

One newly sighted girl was shown some photographs and then paintings by her mother. “Why do they put those dark marks all over them?” “Those aren’t dark marks, her mother explained, “They’re shadows.” “Shadows?” the girl asked, and her mother said yes. “That is one of the ways the eye knows that things have shape,” she said. “If it weren’t for shadows, many things would look flat.” “Well, that is how things do look,” her daughter answered.

A second girl was so stunned by the radiance of the world that she kept her eyes closed for two weeks. When she finally opened them, she saw only a field of light against which everything seemed to be in motion. She could not distinguish objects, but gazed at everything around her, saying over and over again, “Oh God! How beautiful!”

But not everything was beautiful for these patients. They could not judge distances, they reached out for things that were far away or ran into furniture they perceived only

as patches of color. The world turned out to be bigger and more complicated than before and they couldn't control it and many fell into depression.

Others having seen themselves for the first time in a mirror- realized how often others had seen them without their awareness or even permission. Some became terribly self-conscious about their appearance and some refused to leave their rooms.

The distressed father of one young woman wrote her surgeon that his daughter had taken to shutting her eyes when she walked around the house, and that she always seemed happier when she pretended to be blind again.

A fifteen- year old boy finally demanded to be taken back to the sanitarium for the blind, where he had left his girlfriend. "No, really, I can't stand it anymore," he said. "If things aren't altered, I'll tear my eyes out."

Tear your eyes out? After being rescued from a life in the dark, after being carried into the light and presented with a world full of color, depth, movement, space and sights? Tear your eyes out? Why would you do that?

Because it is too much. Too much to see, do, be. It was easier before - smaller, quieter, safer.

But – you were meant to see. I would rather not. The sun hurts my eyes.

Take heart! Get up, he is calling you. What will you do? What will any of us do? This is a story about a blind man who wanted more than anything to see.

Jesus was leaving town, trailed by his disciples and a parade of people, they came upon a blind beggar sitting on the side of the road. His name is Bartimaeus. When he heard that Jesus the Nazarene was passing by, he began to cry out, "Son of David, Jesus! Mercy, have mercy on me!" They tried to hush him up, but he yelled all the louder, "Son of David! Mercy, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped in his tracks. "Call him over."

They called him. "Take heart! Get up, he is calling you.

What will you do? What will any of us do?

The blind man does not hesitate. He throws off his coat, and on his feet at once and came to Jesus.

51 Jesus said, "What can I do for you?" (what does Jesus think he wants)
In that very instant he recovered his sight and followed Jesus down the road.

Do you really want to see? Are you willing to see or not?

And if you are willing, are you willing to see everything - the good along with the awful? The lovely along with monstrous – in yourself, in everyone you meet, in the

world? Are you willing to bruise your knees, to learn your way around obstacles? Are you willing to bruise your heart?

Do you really want to see? The question is not rhetorical. Think carefully, do you really have the courage to see beyond the darkness into the light?

If so, you have to reorient everything – try to make sense out of what you see – the color, depth, distance, perspective, and all those seeing things that we figured out years ago and now take for granted.

Because that is what this is all about: to see or not to see. You can stay where you are. Sit in the dark where everything is familiar and safe. Stay with what you know.

Or you can cry out like Bartimaeus - ask for what your heart's desire.

Jesus says: The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."
52 "On your way," said Jesus. "Your faith has saved and healed you."

There is good news. Peter Marty from the Christian Century puts it like this: The pandemic hasn't taken away our ability to look our neighbor in the eye. Our eyes serve as windows into the world. They're what allow us to take in and interpret sights. But eyes serve as more than receptors to help us see and make sense of the world. They're also meant to be seen. They communicate something of who we are and what we're feeling. There's a reason we tend to look first at a person's eyes before their other facial features.

The whites of eyes provide valuable information for what someone is thinking or might do next.

Jesus said in another place "your eye is the lamp of your body," and the healthier that eye is the more light there is within you. Lamps don't receive or interpret anything from people sitting nearby. They illuminate surroundings. They give off light.

You see, all of compassion begins in the eyes, eyes project and give off, not what they absorb or receive.

It's tough during the current pandemic to enjoy deep and extended conversation with other people, given all the social restrictions. But even with masks on, we still get to see each other's eyes. And those eyes send out valuable cues about life—everything from corner wrinkles indicating a smile to tears of sadness to expressions of true compassion.

What do you to see? Jesus sees us clearly.

This week at the streaming of the Democratic Convention, they showed images of different people from all over the country. Black, brown, Asian, Latina, European singing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands". No matter your party affiliation or none at all, you have to admit it was heartwarming and hopeful to see – essential workers healing others, children asking for better things, families from many cultures laughing in spite of it all. Showing the diversity of this country. Possibility of beloved community.

Take heart! Get up, he is calling you! What will you do?

What do you see?

Because that is what this is all about: to see or not to see.

To walk in darkness or the light.

Jesus replies with compassion.: "Go; your faith has made you well."

Amen.